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Abriana Vesconte

(Dis)Respect in the Classroom: A Gendered Perspective of Academia

Eastern Illinois University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine gendered practices and the experiences of women instructors within academia. Women face different challenges than men in the classroom, and many times, they are challenged by their students. In order to complete this study, I conducted narrative interviews with women faculty ranging from Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), contractual instructors, as well as tenured and untenured professors at a Midwest university. I was able to interview eight women faculty members of varying positions. After completing the interviews and analyzing the data from each instructor, three prominent themes emerged. These themes are: (1) public and private challenges to women instructor's authority, (2) offering justifications for bad student behavior, and (3) a need for nurturing and role modeling good behavior for students. It was clear from all participants that formal and informal mentorship programs should be utilized within academia. Instructors suggested that it would be beneficial to not only incoming faculty members, but to everyone who teaches in the classroom to have a mentor who could help when challenging situations arise.

Dedication

To all the women who helped raise me who are now in Heaven:

To Joyce Schoenhardt, my grandmother; thank you for teaching me compassion and for inspiring me to be a better version of myself.

To Mary Vesconte, my nonna; thank you for being my biggest supporter.

To Susie Brimeyer; thank you for always being proud of me.

I did it for all of you.

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Love you!

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Table of Contents

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| Abstract | 3 |
| Dedication | 4 |
| Acknowledgements | 5 |
| Chapter 1: Introduction | 8 |
| Chapter 2: Method | 26 |
| Chapter 3: Findings | 33 |
| Chapter 4: Discussion | 66 |
| References | 75 |
| Appendix | 78 |

Chapter 1: Introduction

“...Women and faculty of color experience more grade appeals and receive lower course evaluations than their white male counterparts” (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2008, p. 320). As a woman graduate teaching assistant, I experienced this phenomenon myself in my first year of teaching. My experience, however, wasn’t just with grade appeals and course evaluations; I was verbally challenged in the classroom by older and younger male students. This was the inspiration for my thesis, and it has made me increasingly aware of the challenges that women face within the classroom. My personal experiences of being challenged have predominately been from male students. This isn’t to say, however, that women students don’t also challenge women instructors. My most memorable example happened my first semester of teaching, when I was faced with a male student approximately ten years older than me. He clearly felt that he was more capable of instructing the class than I was. This student felt that I was wrong for enforcing the policy that prohibited students from making up a speech if they did not have a university-excused absence. When a student missed her speech date, which she actually had a university-excused absence for, this other student felt that he was required to step in and offer his advice. Within a long-winded and demeaning email, this student told me that he was displeased with the way I was conducting the course, and that it was not fair to students that they could not make up their speeches. He proceeded to tell me that most college students are “young and just in the process of figuring things out” and that I should be more understanding. He suggested that I let this young woman make up her speech because giving her a chance to pass the class during her first attempt at it would be “the right thing to do.” He felt that I needed to demonstrate compassion more often because students have external obligations outside of my class.

Given that my university has no established “best practices” for faculty dealing with difficult students who challenge women’s authority, I felt that the most appropriate course of action would be to email this student back and politely tell him that I appreciated his feedback; I also let him know that the course was well-designed in a way that allowed us to accomplish all of the required tasks of the course in a sixteen-week time frame. I also decided that it would benefit this student, as well as myself, to talk about the email in person. Our face-to-face interaction looked and felt different than the email exchange. The student did not maintain eye contact with me; instead, he would look at the ground, his watch, or the chalkboard right behind me. This experience left me feeling frustrated, and I needed answers as to why this interaction occurred in the first place. My perception of the interaction, and what I believe fueled this student’s commentary, was that he felt he could speak to me in a way that made me feel insignificant simply due to my gender, and perhaps my age. I do not believe this incident would have occurred if I was a male instructor.

While I have had young women challenge my decisions in the classroom, I believe that their disrespect is communicated in a different way. The women in my class will attempt to befriend me or communicate in a way that is unprofessional for the classroom. I have perceived this to be a tactic that is used in order to establish a relationship which may then become beneficial for them when they are looking for leniency or extensions. They have many times tried to refer to me by my first name, and have asked questions about my social media practices, and whether or not we can “be friends” after the semester is over. These behaviors lead me to believe that an instructor’s age (my age) may play a part in how some students interact with instructors. Many times, these young women engaged in this relational-interaction in the classroom. This made me uncomfortable and I struggled with how to respond because I did not

want to offend my students or reduce their chances of wanting to participate in or enjoy my class. Yet, I felt I needed to establish boundaries with my them in order to ensure professionalism and respect. For these reasons, I feel it is important to understand that women students are equally capable of disrupting the classroom and challenging their instructors. Thus, this study includes an investigation of how both young men and women may challenge instructors who are women in and outside of the classroom.

In my conversations with other graduate teaching assistants, and with faculty members, I discovered that many women at my university face inequalities within their classrooms. This was another reassuring factor in my decision to focus on this subject for my thesis. Women faculty members perceive that they are treated differently by their students because of their gender. Many women instructors have shared similar stories of male students, either younger or older, who felt that their student opinion was superior to the actual knowledge of the instructor. Each faculty member I spoke with also suggested that their experience probably would have not occurred if they had been a man. More importantly, when these faculty members shared their experiences with their colleagues that are men, they were often met with surprise and/or disbelief, which led to some women faculty feeling even more discouraged.

Perhaps our notions of what a professor is shapes women's experiences of inequality in the classroom. It is important to understand that whenever we define something, we are also defining what it is not, or cannot be. For example, many may still hold older notions of a professor as a white, middle-aged man, who effortlessly commands the attention of the classroom and is a beacon of knowledge for all who encounter him. With this seemingly harmless stereotype, however, we are not only defining who a professor is, but we are also defining who they are not. When a woman walks into the room, ready to teach a class filled with

students, she may already be at a disadvantage, and must be ready to prove her worth because the moment she walked into the classroom, she may not have fit the mold that many students expected.

The purpose of my study is to examine gendered practices and experiences in academia among women instructors and students. I plan to explore student-instructor interactions within and outside the classroom to examine the ways in which women instructors may perceive or encounter differential treatment from men and women students. I am also interested in exploring the ways in which age intersects with gender of an instructor and how this may shape student-instructor interactions. Finally, as research has demonstrated, faculty of color report differential treatment in the classroom, and thus, I'd also like to explore the ways in which the intersection of gender and race shape student-instructor interactions. A secondary goal of this study will be to examine the ways in which women faculty cope with and handle differential treatment inside and outside of their classrooms.

Theoretical Perspective:

As a framework for understanding gendered interactions in the classroom I will be referencing Standpoint Theory. Standpoint Theory is a feminist theoretical perspective that states that knowledge comes from the social position of an individual. Sandra Harding initially used the term standpoint theory because she felt that it was important to emphasize women's knowledge. People who are not at the top of a social hierarchy are usually ignored, however, they have a unique standpoint that is different from those at the top. Those who are at lower tiers within the social hierarchy have interesting perspectives that allow for important research questions to be made and to have a better understanding of social problems (Harding, 2004). Standpoint Theory assumes that people's experiences, knowledge and [opinions] are shaped by the social groups to

which they belong” (Communication Studies, 2018). By having an understanding of people’s experiences, knowledge, and communication, we can also identify the role that their social ground has had on them (Hartsock, 2007, p. 499). We will never be able to fully comprehend what an individual views as their reality, but by having an open dialogue about their perceived experiences, we can understand their interpretations. One of the most important elements of Standpoint Theory is to keep in mind that it is crucial to allow women to talk about their experiences and analyze them (Hartsock, 2007, p. 505). However, it is crucial to understand that by utilizing this theory I am in no way attempting to say that all women have the same experience. Each individual experience is valuable and important to understanding the gendered behaviors rooted in academia. The layers of identity that exist for each faculty member do shape their experiences and understandings in unique and important ways. I use Standpoint theory to illustrate the ways that women faculty perceive and talk about their interactions with students and how these interactions are influenced by the intersectionality of various faculty identities to include their age, race, and gender. Women instructors may be viewed as being inherently more nurturing, kind, or even less strict because of their gender. These qualities can be prescribed to women because of our societal narrative of women’s roles. “Standpoint Theory seeks to understand the influence that a particular location exerts on people’s views of the world and on their communication...researchers in Standpoint Theory wish to begin with the marginalized and focus on their stories and interpretations” (Hartsock, 2007, p. 505). Standpoint Theory has strong ties to communication because communication is responsible for shaping the standpoints that we have as individuals. An assumption that is made at times is that those who share a standpoint will also be able to communicate in similar styles and share similar communicative practices (Hartsock, 2007, p. 508). This is not always the case, and by utilizing this theory it will further

explore the ways in which experiences can be shared but they are not always performed in the same manner, which may create differences when communicating about that perceived experience. Crenshaw (1994) highlights the importance of intersectionality and the implications that are attached to this theory. There are many different elements that make up our identity, and these different working elements play a role in the way we are perceived by other people. Race, gender, age, among many other things, impact the way that we are perceived and the way that we interact with others (Crenshaw, 2994). By utilizing Standpoint Theory and Intersectionality together, there is an added analytic lens to view the data with.

Literature Review

Little research exists regarding women instructors and their gendered experiences with students in and outside of the classroom. This may be a result of women not feeling safe or welcome to share their stories of inequality or of being challenged by their students. Academia is still a very patriarchal workplace, especially in US culture, and women sharing stories of imbalances of power between instructors and students could be read negatively, such that a woman might be seen as whiny or “weak.” My search for information on this subject matter has yielded limited results. I am not certain why this is true; however, it has been consistent enough for me to notice throughout the process. Thus, my research will add significantly to gender studies and in particular, women’s gendered experiences in and outside the classroom. More important, my study will provide much needed resources for women experiencing these imbalances of power in the classroom.

I outline below the limited, existing research on gendered interactions at work, instructor experiences, and the intersection of age, race, and gender on women’s experiences in and outside the classroom.

Gendered Interactions at Work

Mancel and Pennington (2011) conducted research on the workplace environment for women and the ways that their men and women coworkers spoke about them. Specifically, they examined “Tall Poppy Syndrome” (TPS), an Australian cultural expression, described as a “disease” that feeds on the belief that anyone “who appears to represent success, high ability, or admirable qualities must be attacked, demeaned, and cut down to the common level” (p. 79). Many women in work environments across the spectrum of job types can experience this type of treatment. TPS is gendered in the sense that this syndrome is only used when describing women. Mancel and Pennington suggest that, “gender literature on competition also facilitates understanding of the symptoms and outcomes of TPS. When a woman is perceived as being on the fast track to success, other women may feel as though she is ‘breaking rank,’ or deviating from the ‘norm’” (Mancel & Pennington, 2011, p. 80). By understanding the relationship between gender and the appearance of success, it allows individuals to examine their own role and identity within the workplace. While this is not from the realm of academia, the way that we are conditioned to see power and those in positions of power can lead us to tearing down others that we should be supporting and congratulating. Women supporting women will be an essential element to creating a better sense of equality and respect for women instructors inside and outside of the classroom. When women feel that they are competing with other women, they begin to tear each other down, as we see from this research. When women instructors are facing difficulty in the classroom from their students, that should be a time to come together with other women instructors in the department and work towards finding a united voice. This is especially important in situations where there may not be very many moments where administrative leaders are willing or able to step in and assist. In this sense, this study may help us understand incidents

in which women faculty members experience differential treatment from men and women students simply because they appear to be successful women.

Rubini and Menegatti (2014), two women researchers, found that gendered language impacted the way individuals were selected for job positions. Their study showed that women applicants were talked about more negatively than men applicants. Moreover, this gender linguistic discrimination was perpetrated only by committee members who were men” (Rubini & Menegatti, 2014). These results demonstrate that gender inequality and use of language are affecting the way women are perceiving and experiencing discrimination and mistreatment in their places of employment. In this case, it appears that women in positions of leadership and authority, in any workplace, must work harder to obtain and stay in their positions because they are judged more negatively simply because of their status as a woman. The words that are chosen to describe women and men are vastly different, even if similar qualities are being described. As this study shows, and my casual communication with other individuals, men and women are constantly being depicted as different. This study describes that a man who is applying for a position may be described as strong, persistent, and motivated by deadlines. However, a woman who is applying for the position will not be given the same characteristics. She too may be hardworking, strong, persistent, and motivated by deadlines, however, the words used to describe her will be attached with a negative connotation. She may specifically be described as bossy, rude, pushy, and outspoken. When women are given these labels, it makes it even more difficult to find a balance between being strict in your classroom and being understanding. There seems to be a fine line that many instructors try to balance on, between being strict and unwilling to be flexible, or being too flexible and being seen as a pushover. Personally, this has been one of my biggest struggles as a graduate assistant. Finding your identity as an instructor is hard enough on

a individualistic level, but it becomes even more difficult when you realize that there are so many negative labels that exist which may not have been placed upon you if you were a man.

One of my many goals for this study is examine the ways in which women faculty report negative talk from students. I am interested in addressing if, when, and how students, particularly students that are men, talk negatively about and to their women instructors.

Instructor Experiences

Women do not always feel safe or have the opportunity to share their experiences or perceptions of student-instructor power imbalances with others; however. Meyers (2013) states that, “those who have not experienced or witnessed gender discrimination and other acts of sexism that are, in fact, commonplace within higher education generally believe that accusations of unfair and inequitable treatment of women in academe is hyperbolic, overstated, unjust, and unwarranted” (p. 274). Essentially, Meyers (2013) is telling us that there is a risk that women will not be believed when they disclose information about their gendered treatment in the classroom. If someone has not experienced that situation, it is much more likely that they will downplay the situation because they are genuinely unaware of how impactful the act or behavior is within any professional space, be it the classroom or an office. When women are faced with the possibility that someone they disclose their experience to may not believe them, it silences them further. However, Meyers (2013) believes that it is time to utilize “real-life” examples and bring this practice to light. For example, Myers (2013) offers an example of a time when a woman scholar was recruited by another university. She was expecting her current university to counteroffer, which is seen as a “a fairly common practice at universities that seek to retain their most valued faculty” (p. 275). Myers notes that the woman spoke with her dean and his “initial response was that no retention offer would be forthcoming unless the professor’s husband – who,

like she, is a prominent scholar and works in the same department at UVA – also had an offer from the other university” (p. 275). This example of blatant disregard for truly valuing a woman instructor is upsetting and shows that even though she had the same type of scholarly background as her husband, she was not worth keeping, unless her husband was also at risk for leaving. While this example clearly demonstrates continued administrative patriarchal ideologies of who “counts” and who doesn’t in academia, it also provides us insight into why students might also feel they can more readily and easily challenge women faculty members in and outside the classroom. When women are not valued by their department, I believe that can be reflected in the classroom with student interactions. Why should a student feel the need to respect their instructor if they notice that the policies of the department or university does not accurately appreciate and value the instructor? This can lead women instructors to feel frustrated and as if they are lacking support. Without support from the department, women instructors cannot feel that their voices are being heard and appreciated.

Student and Instructor Interactions

Many women instructors I have spoken with have shared their stories of student mistreatment of instructors. Meyers (2013) shares a story of her own, where she notes: “a female lecturer who taught undergraduates in my department at Georgia State University told me that some of her students [that are men] would comment on her appearance and make inappropriate sexually suggestive remarks” (p. 275). Meyers notes that the instructor felt that it was her fault for this type of commentary and was under the impression that her clothing or physical appearance was to blame for the remarks that she was receiving. After Meyers reassured her that any form of sexual harassment was never the fault of the victim, she herself found that “sexual harassment of female faculty by students who are men is far from uncommon in my department”

(Meyers, 2013, p. 275). In another example found in an article by Smith & Johnson-Bailey. (2011), they state that, “our nation [is] becom[ing] more diverse, [and] many college campuses are employing more women and non-White faculty. Although the number of women and non-White faculty in higher education has been increasing, White women and non-White faculty still remain underrepresented in higher education relative to their numbers in the U.S. population (Aguirre, 2000)” (Smith & Johnson-Bailey, 2011, p. 116). This underrepresentation can lead to women feeling invalid and perceived as less important. If this is an indicator of normalized treatment of women in the realm of academia, it is able to confirm that some instructor’s perceptions of gendered practices towards them are not fabricated and should be further explored to gain a better understanding of the workplace environment. We should also be aware that these are norms that have been constructed by society, so it is not limited to the realm of academia. Many students may come into the university setting with the mindset that they are allowed to speak to women in a different way than men, however, when we talk to women instructors in this way, as shown in the article, we are facilitating gendered practices.

According to a USA Today article written by Shannon (2018), in June of 2018 RateMyProfessors.com removed their chili pepper rating availability from their website. This website has been utilized across the country by college students in order to help others determine which college courses they should take, which to avoid, and most importantly, which professor they should take. Students are able to submit candid reviews of their instructors and score them based upon the easiness of the class itself, the way that the instructor grades assignments, the level of difficulty of homework, and if they enjoyed the professor. They also had an added feature that was known as the chili pepper. The chili pepper allowed students to rate their professor on how “hot” they perceived them to be. This chili pepper was “meant to reflect a

dynamic/exciting teaching style” in the words of the creators of RateMyProfessors.com, however, it was used by most as a way to indicate the attractiveness of the professor. This pepper was utilized in the rating of men and women instructors, and although there had been criticism of this rating utility before 2018, a tweet that went viral sparked a change. USA Today (2018), reported on this viral tweet that was created by Beth Ann McLaughlin, who is a professor at Vanderbilt University. She aimed her frustration at the website and commented that it was “obnoxious and utterly irrelevant to our teaching” (Shannon, USA Today, 2018). This annoyance was not only felt and understood by women in instructor positions, but men as well were equally irritated by this rating scale. It is important to recognize that this change had not been made until mid-2018. Due to many social movements such as MeToo and TimesUp, women have been speaking out about the inequality that they face in the workplace, and this website was not advocating for women or men by having the chili pepper rating scale. After the backlash on social media and the viral tweet that sparked conversation amongst men and women, the chili pepper was removed from RateMyProfessors. However, it is important to consider the damage that was already done by having this chili pepper available on the website for so long. This rating implies that part of taking a class that is worthwhile is if your instructor is attractive, as if that has anything to do with the ability to teach well. The perception that is held by students in regard to the attractiveness of their professor can spark inappropriate conversation and behavior in class. If students are basing whether interactions with their professors are worthwhile due to how attractive they are perceived to be, that seems to say something about the way women are valued and respected in academia. External physical traits have nothing to do with the intelligence of an instructor, and if students base their belief of quality on how attractive their professor is, academia will suffer. Whether it is believed that the professor is attractive or unattractive, student

conduct may be altered because of this belief. As I have found other research, women who are instructors are not unfamiliar to being harassed by their students for being seen as good looking. I presume that if the chili pepper rating was utilized heavily to work against an instructor, they would possibly face unwilling or disrespectful students due to their perception that perceived beauty factors into the ability of an educated instructor.

Respect and Gender

Perhaps even more alarming is the lack of respect that women are given in academia. Respect can be understood for the purpose of this project as the way in which individuals interact while observing and abiding by boundaries that are set by the assumed role of the individuals involved in the communicative exchange. Søndergaard (2001), for example, explores the way in which gender and power shape respect in academia. While interviewing men in positions of power at a university, Søndergaard asked these men to explain why and how women gained their place in academia. One interviewee stated that, “ambitious women on their way into the systems should show themselves loyal to the local power regimes. They should, in other words, read the regimes they are about to enter thoroughly and play by its rules as well as they possibly can. They should not exhibit feminist interests, and thereby potential gender equality discourses” (Søndergaard, 2001, p. 149). In other words, women must “play by the rules” and put their own values and beliefs aside. During that same interview with a male academic, “he also advises and stresses that women should grasp the opportunity to use ‘their femininity’ as a way of ensuring their visibility and positive recognition in the eyes of their male colleagues and leaders” (Søndergaard, 2001, p. 143). Thus, based on this man’s academic viewpoint, women are not respected for their ideas and their intellectual ability; women are “visible” only if they utilize “various kinds of flirting practices, and other ways of confirming masculinity among male

agents” (Søndergaard, 2001, p. 143). This kind of false validation for women is unfair and sexist, which can carry over into the classroom when students believe that they attend a university that supports, condones, and practices sexist, gendered behaviors.

Age and Gender Perceptions

Research has shown consistently that gender plays a role in the way that we perceive and interact with individuals. However, I have found in my personal experiences that age plays a role in the treatment I have received. Some of my students have wondered whether or not I am qualified to be teaching them simply because of my age. It may not always be spoken, however, their nonverbal cues during the first day of class, and even throughout the first few weeks seemed to suggest they were questioning my qualifications. Being an instructor at twenty-three has many benefits such as relating to my students, building relationships with them, and providing them with a space where they may feel more comfortable self-disclosing. McCann and colleagues (2005) state that, “young American adults displayed the greatest amount of normative respect in both politeness (e.g., should listen patiently, should speak politely) and deference (e.g., should obey, should defer, should hold back opinions, should restrain myself from arguing) toward older individuals, followed by middle-age adults and same-aged young adults” (p. 304). However, there are times where I have perceived that I am challenged because of my age. If I have a student that is older than me, they may feel that they are able to challenge the way that I grade an assignment, speech, or test. They may even go as far as to critique the way I teach, which has happened before. “These findings are consistent with an inter-group perspective on intergenerational communication (e.g., Harwood et al., 1995; Williams & Garrett, 2005), further confirming prior research that age is a powerful determinant of communicative beliefs, judgments, and actions” (McCann et al., 2005, p. 303). Age as a factor which determines

gendered practices and behavior by students in the classroom is not limited to the perception of youth. Perceived young and older ages can be an indicator for how students will interact with instructors.

Perceived older age also has an impact on the way that women are treated in the realm of academia. Canibano et al. (2016) states that, “a well-established stream of data documents ways that gender shapes scientific and research careers. Compared to men, women have lower ranks/positions, less prestigious institutional locations, and less recognition and rewards” (Canibano et al., 2016, p. 321). With this in mind, women are already at a disadvantage just by being women, and their age can have a negative impact on the perception of their work ethic and ability as instructors. Abramo et al. (2016) observed that age can be a negative factor in the way that older faculty members are observed in academia. The “role of motivation in the productivity levels registered over the researcher’s different career stages...[show] that as the academics ages increase and their retirement nears, they become less motivated to carry out research and prefer to devote themselves to other activities” (Abramo et al., 2016, p. 303). When there is a lack of faith in the ability of an instructor based on their age, this can have a negative effect on the classroom environment. Teaching is an interactive experience and motivation is needed from both the instructor, as well as the student. Without motivation, there can be a downfall in the class environment. Students who are not motivated, will not have the same desire to participate and weigh in on class discussion. Instructors who are not motivated will not put in the same amount of effort and passion into their work which can range from planning lessons, planning assignments, and in-class discussions. Women who are instructors already have a harder time engaging and earning the trust of their students due to their gender, and if they are also perceived to be older than some of their other instructors, there can be lack of enthusiasm or faith in the

instructor's abilities. There are negative aspects that come with either perception of age, and especially in the case of women who are instructors, they must work especially hard to prove that they are hard-working throughout their entire career, not just their early years in the field. my belief.

Both age and gender play critical roles in the way that women are viewed in the realm of academia. It is important to highlight the pressure that is placed onto women to play the role of the nurturer, which is not appropriate for many workplace environments, however, it is a stereotype and expectation that many women are criticized with. Meltzer and McNulty (2011) state that "there is a pervasive belief that men are less nurturing and caring than women. People expect men to be less empathic than women..." (Meltzer & McNulty, 2011, p. 57). Women are expected to be nurturing and empathetic, and when women do not act in this way, they are often times disliked because of it. In the narratives shared within this thesis, it is evident that when women instructors do not act in a way that fits this societal mold, students become frustrated and often times irritated. Women are expected to be much more caring than men, and when women violate that expectation, we are taking away the expected reaction that our students were hoping for, which can force them to renegotiate the way that they navigate the conversation with their instructor. The pressure to interact in a certain way with students can be hard for many instructors and finding a balance between being understanding and kind and being perceived as a nurturing figure is difficult. The pressure to perform in the way that society expects is not fair to instructors, whether they be women or men, and it is critical to keep in mind that women who are not as nurturing as others are equally capable of being talented instructors.

Gender, Race and Women Faculty

As I have explored the ways in which age and gender impact the perceived treatment of women faculty, race also can be a perceived factor that determines the way women faculty members interact with their students. Tindall (2009) states that, “female faculty members of color find themselves outside of the mainstream of academic life and culture. These professors are ‘marginalized and excluded from meaningful participation in their academic departments’ (Woods, 2001, p. 196) (p.2)”. If women instructors are being excluded due to their race by people that they work alongside, this may generate a similar mindset within the classroom. Basow et al. (2013) state that, “using student evaluations of faculty at the top 25 liberal arts colleges in the U.S. posted on the website ratemyprofessor.com, Reid (2010) found that Black faculty, especially Black men, were evaluated more critically and given lower ratings on quality, helpfulness, and clarity than their White counterparts” (p. 354). While Black men were evaluated more critically when it came to clarity and helpfulness, Basow et al. (2013) found that “results revealed that African American professors, especially women, were rated the lowest on all three dimensions and Asian professors were rated lower than the White professors on interpersonal skills” (p. 354). Women instructors perceive themselves as facing gendered practices in the classroom, and instructors who are not white are perceiving an additional difference within their encounters with students due to their race.

All of these elements can be understood as how intersectionality impacts our day-to-day lives. Jingzhou (2017) examines the work of Patricia Hill-Collins and her thoughts on intersectionality. Jingzhou (2017) states that, “Collins and Bilge are able to differentiate between critical inquiry and praxis. Furthermore, they expound on the critical articulations of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, demonstrating the complexity in how an individual politic of identities emerges within various compositions of interlocking systems of

oppression” (Jingzhou, 2017, p. 125). Intersectionality is an important lens to utilize when examining all the ways in which our roles and identity influence the way that we navigate the world. Our race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and all other elements of our identity influence our lives on a daily basis. These roles are intertwined with one another and they are constantly working to establish a balance in society to establish who we are and who we want to world to see us as. In academia, all of these elements are actively working for or against us in the classroom depending on an individual’s identity. The way that a classroom views the traits that are intertwined within an instructor can be indicative of how the instructor will be received by the class. We make bonds and relationships with those who we relate to and feel that we understand, and when an instructor does not meet the expectations of the students within the class based on race, gender, or age, it can become difficult to foster a positive learning environment.

To conclude, the purpose of my study is to examine gendered practices and experiences in academia among women instructors and students. I am also interested in exploring the ways in which age and race intersect with gender in shaping student-instructor interactions. My study is guided by the following research questions.

RQ1: What are women’s experiences with mistreatment and gendered behaviors in the classroom, and how does that make possible a climate of disrespect?

RQ2: How might age and race of a woman instructor shape student-instructor interactions?

RQ3: How do women faculty cope with the issues of differential treatment in the classroom?

Chapter 2: Method

This study explores the ways women instructors perceive their classroom interactions with their students, both in- and outside of the classroom. I used narrative interviews to examine how women instructors construct these experiences. “Narrative is retrospective meaning making – the shaping or ordering of past experience...unlike a chronology, which also reports events over time, a narrative communicates the narrator’s point of view, including why the narrative is worth telling in the first place”. By utilizing narrative interviews, the narrator’s story is flexible, variable, and shaped in part by interactions with the audience (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 181). Narrative interviews allow me to focus on the interviewee and their perceptions as a woman instructor, while collecting their stories about important classroom experiences. Narratives are an especially important tool for creating and re-establishing reality within society. Narratives are also a tool that can be utilized when explaining certain aspects of an individual’s experience, which helps to create and reinforce that individual’s identity through the retelling of their experiences. When different narratives begin to share similar stories, it allows for others to understand that there is a trend of occurrences in people’s lives who experience similar treatment/life events. Specifically, narrative interviewing will be the most appropriate form of data collection for my thesis due to the goals that I have set for this project. These goals involve examining the gendered practices and experiences in the classroom among instructors and students in an effort to understand how women faculty can and do handle the possible differential treatment. An interpretive approach offers the best method for achieving my goals. Specifically, qualitative research will allow me to collect thick descriptions of unique data that women instructors experience in and outside the classroom. While there is no way for me to accurately represent every woman faculty member’s experience in the academy, qualitative

research allows me to uncover the unique and vast experiences of women faculty members that other types of research, namely quantitative research, could not uncover. In particular, by allowing women faculty members to share their experiences through narrative interviews, we are able to understand their entire story, rather than bits and pieces. We also gain unique perspectives from women instructors whose voices have otherwise been ignored in academia. More important, I did not want to simplify my interviewee's perceived experiences into numbers on a Likert Scale, mostly because I felt that it was necessary to truly explore their stories which included their perceptions of treatment from their students. Giving my interviewee's a chance to tell their own story in their own words without having to fit into a category or choose a statement that fit their experience best, allows me to identify their unique experiences as well as the experiences.

Participants

I conducted narrative interviews with women faculty ranging from Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), contractual instructors, as well as tenured and untenured professors at a Midwest university. I was able to interview eight women faculty members of varying positions. I wanted to ensure equal representation of younger and older women since I am looking at how age may impact student-teacher interactions. Finally, I was sure to include women of various racial and ethnic backgrounds (as available and representative of the university faculty make-up) to explore how race may intersect with gender and age in terms of differential treatment in the classroom. By choosing to interview women with different job titles, I hope to uncover any possible gendered trends in academia that are not restricted to one level of instructor. The interview process was professional; however, being able to have a comfortable line of communication during the interview process is crucial to collecting the most detailed and

accurate information possible. I wanted interviewees to feel welcome and I encouraged them to disclose the information of any occurrences they have experienced related to gender inequality.

In order to conduct successful narrative interviews, I had to be certain that I established rapport with my interviewees to help them feel comfortable sharing this information with me. If I were to request an interviewee without making them comfortable and allowing them to feel secure disclosing information to me, I would not be able to get the same information and level of disclosure that I was able to maintain with a strong and positive rapport. I found that it was very helpful that I had previous encounters with many of the individuals that I interviewed. I have been able to build a relationship with many of the individuals that I interviewed over the course of many years, and I felt that those interviews were noticeably better than the interviews that I had with instructors that were not as familiar with me. I felt that in order to have a successful interview with those who did not know me as well, I would need to introduce myself, tell them about my personal experiences that fueled my passion for this research, and then tell them about the confidentiality policy and how their anonymity would be maintained throughout the process. Once I had explained why I was excited and passionate about this subject matter, I felt that those who did not feel as comfortable with me prior to my disclosure, suddenly felt more comfortable sharing their own perceptions and stories with me. Without allowing myself to become vulnerable for the sake of building rapport, I would have struggled to get the same information from my interviewee's that I did not hold as close of a relationship with.

I also believe that it is important to have a transparent relationship with my interviewees. If they are unable to see the finished product, I believe that it would cause feelings of distrust and uncertainty. In order to reassure my participants that their words will remain true to their original form, I will provide all of my participants with a finished product of this research. They will be

able to have access to the finished product not only to reassure them that confidentiality was kept, as well as their truth, but to show them that they have made an impact on my research in a positive way by participating in an interview with me.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted one-on-one with faculty members and lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. The interviews happened in a setting that was most comfortable for each of my interviewees. I wanted to be sure that there would be plenty of privacy and that my interviewees would not feel as though they could not answer all of my questions as honestly as they may have wanted to. I completed the interviews in each interviewee's office, which allowed them to feel comfortable in a space that was their own. Knowing that we could close the door and have a private conversation allowed both of us to feel more comfortable and allowed the conversation to flow much more naturally. I believe that by allowing these interviews to happen in a place that was comforting for the interviewee also gave the interviewee a sense of security and control over the interview process. The interviewee's chose what time they would be interviewed, and they chose to meet in their offices, which is their personal space that they have control over. This helped to ease the tension and possibly apprehension about answering my interview questions.

The interview process consisted of asking open ended questions that encouraged interviewees to answer in as much depth as they would like. I did not want to limit the responses by asking closed questions or questions that may have been too specific. It was important to me that I depict my interviewees experiences inside and outside of the classroom in their own terms without imposing my own thoughts or beliefs on their experiences. I used a list of pre-determined questions that I asked all participants (see Appendix A), however there were times when I asked additional questions based on participant's responses. There were several times

when the interviewee's responses varied, where some instructors felt more comfortable disclosing more information than others. Regardless of how they chose to respond, there was consistency in questioning during the interview process that ensured that I was not selective in my questioning for one instructor over another to prompt her to give certain answers. I appreciate that each interviewee was able to share their personal perception of their interactions inside and out of the classroom with their students because it allowed me to hear their narrative and understand where they are coming from. Each experience is different for women faculty members, and even during the interview there were aspects that I could not control. Some interviewees found themselves getting distracted and talking about something that no longer pertained to the question. While this was, at times, hard to get back on track, it helped me to uncover something that I did not think would be an element of the possible gendered practices of academia. One reason for the distraction or getting "off-track" was that I asked all of the interviewees to give examples of challenging students or situations they had experienced. Interviewees were encouraged to share examples but were not required to; collecting their narrative experiences, however, helped me to better understand their perception of their role in academia.

I audio recorded each interview. This allowed me to focus on the interview questions and interacting with the interviewee rather than taking notes during the interview. I asked each interviewee before I began the interview if they were comfortable with me recording the audio from the interview session. When they gave me their permission, I began recording the interviews. The audio-recordings allowed me to ask follow-up questions where needed rather than focusing on writing down what they were saying as it was happening. All interviews were audio recorded using my personal laptop and saved onto my laptop as well as a flashdrive. All

recorded data has been password protected on my laptop and the flashdrive will be kept in a locked space in my office. The only individual with the ability to have access to the flashdrive is myself, and this played a role in allowing my interviewees to feel comfortable talking to me. Some of the narratives that were shared with me could have been perceived as harmful to their success at the university if the interview audio was released, which is why extra precautionary security measures were taken. All names will be changed in the final written report as an added measure of confidentiality and protection. I have changed the names of my interviewees as well as any student or faculty name that was mentioned during an interview. This could have ranged from the name of a student to a name of another faculty member at the university. This eliminated interviewee's fears or potential risks that could have discouraged the interviewees from participating.

Analysis

Once interviews were audio recorded, I transcribed each interview. The transcribed interview data will help me identify possible patterns of student-faculty gendered interactions. I use thematic analysis to uncover possible themes and patterns of gendered experiences in- and outside the classroom. Owen (1984) defines thematic interpretation as a naturalistic study that goes beyond relational research because it relies "not on recall of relationship events or on perceptions of imagined encounters, but on unimposed lay conceptions of actual communication episodes in current relationships" (p. 274). Owen's notes that a theme can be noted within a narrative when recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness are visible. Conducting a thematic analysis, thus, allows me to find common themes in my interviewee's responses. Recurrence occurs when "at least two parts of a report [have] the same thread of meaning...repetition is an explicit repeated use of the same wording...[and] forcefulness refers to vocal inflection, volume,

or dramatic pauses which serve to stress and subordinate some utterances...” (Owen, 1984, p. 275). By using these guidelines, I was able to highlight themes that carry over from one interview to another, and ultimately propose strong arguments for how women faculty members experience differential treatment in- and outside the classroom based on issues of gender, race, and age.

Chapter 3: Findings

I used thematic analysis as a means to uncover themes related to differential treatment in the classroom for women instructors. Three prominent themes emerged from the data. These themes are: (1) public and private challenges to women instructor's authority, (2) offering justifications for bad student behavior, and (3) a need for nurturing and role modeling good behavior for students. These themes emerged in different ways for each instructor, yet every participant in this study reported being challenged by students, rationalizing why students behaved badly, while also taking ownership of those challenges and bad behaviors by reporting that they (as women instructors) needed to "show respect" and good role modeling in hopes of getting respect and good behavior back from students.

Challenges to Women's Authority

Women instructor's reported being challenged in two prominent ways: publicly in class and privately outside of class. Challenges to women instructors occur in a multitude of ways, but all women instructors, regardless of age, race, or gender reported encountering these challenges from their students. It also appears from the interview data that these challenges are the "rule" rather than the exception. That is, women instructors expressed an empathic "yes" when asked if they have ever had a student challenge them in the classroom. Not one participant had to stop and think about the answer to this question. Another alarming factor that was highlighted in the interview data was that all instructors had multiple experiences with a student challenging them in the classroom. Not a single interviewee had to dig deep to find a memory of being challenged by a student in the classroom.

Public Challenging

Public challenging occurs in those moments where students engage in verbal arguing or noticeable nonverbal dissatisfaction with an instructor during class and in front of others (mostly other students). All of the women in this study reported times where they were publicly challenged, whether it was recent or early on in their career.

When asked how women instructors are challenged publicly, most faculty members reported multiple experiences, from minor occurrences to major offenses. One young faculty member noted that her “most combative situation was that [she] had a student who visibly had some sexist ideas and you could tell because he would roll his eyes whenever [she] would say something that didn’t align with what he wanted to do”. When students react to instructors this way, it becomes evident to other students in the class that there is a presence of disrespect. This is a form of aggressive challenging; however, it can escalate to an issue of outright challenging if not addressed. For example, this same student reportedly challenged the instructor’s age. For her own reasons, the instructor felt she needed to answer his questions, and confirmed that she was only a year older than the student. The student responded by saying, “well I’m 21, so how are you my teacher?” This act of disrespect was made in front of the entire class, which required her to explain her role to this student. The student ended the confrontation by rolling his eyes and saying, “I don’t effing care.”

Unfortunately, this confrontation was the “rule” not the exception for women faculty, especially the younger women in this study (no older faculty members reported being asked or challenged about their age). Other ways that students publicly challenged women faculty include asking for clarification of degrees earned by instructor, throwing things, storming out of the classroom, talking to others while the instructor was talking, and dismissing the instructor’s comments as unimportant.

One instructor reported that she was challenged by a student when he was in the middle of giving his speech presentation. This instructor was in her earlier years of teaching when a student was giving his speech and went over the time requirement, which forced her (the instructor) to give him “the stop signal” using hand signals. As the student continued on for some time, she also continued to give hand signals indicating he needed to stop. Once she “made the motion with [her] hand across [her] neck” that was to signal that the speaker had gone over time by a significant amount and needed to stop immediately. The instructor noted: “he stopped in the middle of his speech and looked at [her] and said, ‘what the fuck does this mean?’ and he mimicked [her] gesture”. This instructor was so upset that she told him to get his things and get out of the classroom. She then dismissed class and walked out to the hallway to find the disrespectful student and “had a long conversation about disrespect”. This example also highlights the intersectionality found between age and gender. This instructor was a younger professional, just starting in her career as a college instructor and with her perceived young age, the challenge seemed to be much more aggressive.

This same instructor also had a male student later in her career who displayed a blatant act of challenging and disrespect. She was handing back graded papers, and when she handed the paper to the student, he looked at it and “didn’t like the grade he got so he crumpled it up and threw it at [her] at the front of the room”. The instructor called the student to come and pick up the paper that he had thrown at her, and he refused on multiple occasions of being asked. Finally, another student told him to “pick up [his] paper and leave” in which he decided to pick it up and exit the classroom.

Another instructor noted she had “a lot of difficult interactions with students” that she could illustrate for me during the interview. One instance occurred when she asked her students

to discuss controversial opinions that they may have. One particular student said, “women should not be educators at the university level because women should have more subservient roles in society”. This was the most blatantly sexist comment that she had ever heard at the time, and it occurred in the classroom in front of other students. This comment fuels the negative attitudes and behavior towards women instructors in university settings. Many times, this blatant act of sexism has no negative consequence because women instructors are not sure where to take their concerns. For example, this instructor reported that she didn’t feel she could or should report this incident since it was seemingly directed at her only and wasn’t anything more than disruptive to the class. Most instructors in this study also noted that they felt the university was extremely student-focused, which isn’t necessarily bad, yet when something like this occurs, it makes women instructors feel that their voices are not, cannot, and will not be heard by university administration; instead the student is favored over the faculty.

Another instructor noted her struggle with a blatantly sexist student. She also suggested that almost every seasoned women professor at this particular university had encountered this same student. She stated that the student was “combative and aggressive” towards women, and only women. She stated that, “he had a lot of other issues, but one of the biggest was that in addition to a lot of conspiracy theories he bought into, he had a negative view of women” which impacted the way the class functioned. Whenever this instructor would try to get the student back on track and on topic with the current class discussion, he would resort to aggression and argue that his point was on topic. This instructor even found herself so frightened by this man that after one of her classes, she contemplated calling campus security.

This same instructor has also struggled with students questioning her age and she stated that, “I’m not that young, but I guess I read as young to people. So there is some of that, so I’m

like okay is it that or that students are pushy like, ‘I’m paying you, I deserve this grade’”. She also encountered students who were frustrated with her for even upholding her syllabus and the policies within it. She noted having students who were doing poorly in a class accuse her of being “ridiculous for having this standard, expecting that I would not google my answers, expecting other things, which is weird because you’re calling out a cheater in a way that is blatant and violates standards here, and then to be made to feel that you are the ridiculous one”. This instructor noted the lack of responsibility that students take and remarked that challenging instructors has become a coping mechanism for many students who are unhappy and dissatisfied with their grades.

Yet another seasoned instructor noted her struggles with students publicly challenging her in the classroom. This instructor noted one student “really had a problem with women”. She reported that this student ended up being suspended from the university because of his behavior towards women in the department. She stated that “he refused to demonstrate proper decorum in the classroom...and bring biblical verse to support his position”. The behavior illustrates the way that students can devalue and disrespect an instructor’s classroom, as well as the planned content for the course. This same instructor also mentioned that when she was challenged in this way, that “it has been the challenging of my credentials, challenging my knowledge of things”. She believes that this stems from the idea that students should see “women faculty as their peers” and because of this “you have to work twice as hard to get half the respect”.

Students also seem to challenge women faculty when they don’t get what they want. One told a story about a student who came to class late during the day of an exam, and when the class was finished, he was still taking the exam. When this instructor told him that he needed to turn in his exam because he was out of time “he threw the test in [her] face and stormed out”. After that

experience, the student never came back to class; however, the instructor noted that this was an experience that has stayed with her for many years. She also reportedly deals with students who are blatantly sexist and aggressive. She had this to say about one sexist and aggressive student: “he would argue things in the classroom, especially if things came up about identity issues and power, race, gender, those were big hot topics for him where he would make other students uncomfortable”. Most women faculty suggested that they don’t believe these student behaviors would occur if they were a man.

While the above examples suggest blatant “public” challenging in the classroom, there are also smaller acts that the instructors noted as disrespectful that do not necessarily involve public arguing or outright disagreement or disrespect. For example, one instructor noted that she had a woman student “come up to the front of the class and walk right in front of me to plug her cell phone into the outlet” which left her feeling taken aback and disrespected. What seems to be most notable about this incident, beyond a clear disregard for the instructor’s presence, is that the student was a woman.

Most interesting is that while women faculty reported that both men and women students challenged them in the classroom, the instructors noted that women students challenge them in ways that look much different than how men challenge them in the classroom. It seems that women students are much more passive about their challenges, and men are outright aggressive in most instances. Another instructor noted her experience with a woman student, who interrupted the middle of a class lecture and said, “you don’t act like a professor”. This instructor stopped the lesson and then asked her to “unpack” what she said by asking her “how does a professor act?” When the student had to explain her reasoning, it allowed her to understand that what she had said was disrespectful and inappropriate, and possibly opened the door for the

student to re-examine their definition of what a professor looks like. This instructor went on to explain that she does look younger than many other instructors her age and that “sometimes you can see the shock when [she would] walk into the classroom and they question [her] right away. She noted that students question her competency, her ability to teach, and whether she has experience or not in the classroom mostly because they see her as young and a woman.

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA) interviewed for this study reported this questioning of their age quite a bit. One GTA noted how her students, particularly male students, have challenged her during her first year of teaching, mostly by needing to tell the instructor how they should teach the class or handle student (or assignment) situations. This particular GTA mentioned that during class, or right after class in the presence of other students, she has had male students tell her that “this is how other instructors have handled this”. She noted that she felt her students challenged the way that she conducted her class and minimized her role as the instructor.

Clearly gender and age seem to be an impetus for student challenges of women instructors in the classroom. Unfortunately, race also seems to invoke instructor challenging as well. One young instructor that I had the pleasure of interviewing gave me an insightful take on being an instructor who identifies as “not an American”. She notes many small challenges made by students during her time in the classroom, such as when students “roll their eyes and they might sign or try to sleep. Those are nonverbal, but you can see that it is still disrespectful”. She went on to mention how signs of boredom can be particularly infectious in the classroom environment. This instructor mentioned that when students sense that other students would rather be doing something else, and the bad behavior seems to have no negative consequence, it can spread and create a negative classroom environment. She also notes her struggle with students

who challenge her by asking questions about her title and degree. She mentioned that “students ask [her] if she is a doctor or not”. She noted that to her students, she is “not an authority figure”, however she did mention that she believed “it would be different if [she] was a fifty-year-old man, rather than a thirty-year-old teaching the same thing”.

Another woman instructor of color shared her experience of being challenged in the classroom, where examples of intersectionality could be identified quickly. She identified as an assistant professor who has had many challenges from her students. These included being blatantly disrespected in the classroom such as when one student “just got up and walked out in a very, everybody noticed, like it was a dramatic exit, you know? It was very rude, and I was waiting, and I think it was particularly rude to give me an attitude like that”. This student also became very “non-participative” and the instructor decided to confront him and ask what was going on in the student’s life for him to be behaving in such a way. The student responded in a way that was “closed off” and left the instructor feeling that “[she] had to decide which instructor [she] wanted to become”.

These examples clearly reflect a troubling trend for women instructors regarding being publically challenged or disrespected in the classroom in front of other students. This trend is especially pronounced for younger women and women faculty of color, who are reportedly challenged more often about their age, title, and credibility as professors.

Private Challenging

In addition to public challenges, women faculty report multiple instances of private challenging from students. Private challenges occur in private spaces. These often occurred via email, after class, or during a faculty member’s office hours. A second way of privately

challenging women faculty was through nonverbal cues in and outside the class in direct response to the instructor in some way. These forms of challenges can be categorized as passive aggressive and, at times, outright aggression. Passive aggressive challenging emerged as sexual flirting, eye rolling, refusal to go to office hours, refusal to acknowledge proper address terms, and coming in late to class. Outright acts of aggression and challenging in private spaces were reported as those moments where students argued with instructors outside of class, and sent inappropriate and often times, angry emails.

One of the instructors shared her experiences with being challenged privately while teaching an online accelerated course. She had a student who was arrogant and “wanted [her] to let him take an exam early...but [she] could not accommodate him”. When he was upset because he could not get what he wanted from her, she “told him it was inappropriate and that the decorum in an online class is the same in face-to-face classes and that [she] would contact student standards if he did not straighten up”. After the course had ended and student evaluations had been released, this instructor noticed a particularly dissatisfied evaluation which she could only assume was this male student. He said that “[she] should be forced to take this class with someone who knew what they were doing”.

Another instructor told about a time when she had a student who was in the process of being removed from her course due to behavioral issues and refusal to uphold the student code of conduct. She noted that he “kept on emailing [her] to force [her] to sit down with him and meet with him, and [she] finally emailed everyone and the dean of students. The president, the provost, and said that it was ‘outrageous that this student is allowed to harass [her]’”. This student caused the instructor to feel unsafe and threatened on multiple occasions.

Another example of a private challenge came from seasoned instructor who was dealing with a student being disrespectful in class. This student started arguing with the instructor at the end of class and then followed her up to her office. He “came into [her] office and kind of cornered [her] at [her] desk so [she] felt that [she] had no out. He told [her], ‘I don’t have to listen to you anymore. I have sat and listened to you enough this semester. You don’t belong in the classroom, you belong at home in the kitchen where the Bible says you should be. I can tell you are a feminist by the way you talk and you will go to hell for being a feminist’”.

This student continued to argue with the instructor and he “came at [her] from around [her] desk and he had gone to the point where [she] was clearly uncomfortable” so she escorted him to the department chair. The department chair happened to be a man, and this student’s demeanor drastically changed when they were speaking opposed to how he engaged in conversation with this instructor. He was still “aggressive with the chair, but much less so than when he was with [her]”. This incident ultimately made the instructor feel so unsafe that she had “university police officers stationed at the classroom because [she] was not sure if the student was going to show up or what was going to happen” during her final exam.

Another incident that this instructor reported happened when she was a younger faculty member. She had a “young male student who was constantly making sexually suggestive and flirtatious comments”. This did not happen in the classroom with other students, but after class was over or in office hours. One evening when she was out with friends at a restaurant, he was the bartender working and asked if he could buy her a drink, in which she responded “no, I’m not drinking tonight”. This act of flirtation was clearly deemed as unacceptable and inappropriate for the student-teacher relationship, according to the instructor. However, due to her perceived age

this student felt that he could speak with her in such a way that was uncomfortable for the instructor.

During the interview process, an instructor mentioned that she faced a private challenge from an older man who was a non-traditional student. He encouraged her not to use “salty language because no one would want to hear their preacher or minister speak the way [she] did”. He finished his note to this instructor by saying “I’m an older man, honey. I’m just telling you how it is”. This commentary is not only inappropriate, but also incredibly disrespectful to the instructor and her pedagogical preferences. This student challenged her “teaching perspective or those things that are all deliberate choices”, which he was most likely unaware of the fact that her choice of language was deliberate.

Most of the private challenges seemingly happened to the younger faculty members in this study. These challenges came in the form of challenging the young women’s authority and knowledge in the classroom. For example, one young instructor mentioned that she feels that her students ignore her in certain instances. For example, “one student confronted [her] about grading that [she] did and the student did not like her grade. It was after class and [she] asked her to come to [her] office, but she left and did not come to [her] office. The refusal from this student to attend office hours or even to continue the conversation in the instructor’s office is a passive, yet ever-present challenge. This student dismissed her instructor by refusing to speak privately about her grade that she was dissatisfied with, which makes it increasingly difficult for an instructor to know how to communicate with that student the reasoning behind their grade.

Other young faculty reported similar experiences. For example, a first year Graduate Teaching Assistant shared with me that she normally has private challenges rather than public ones. She mentioned that her students “come see [her] after class to argue their own case for why

I'm wrong. [She] appreciate[s] that they do it after class and they usually don't call [her] out in front of the class." She mentioned that if she were to be challenged publicly or called out in front of the class, she "would have a very difficult time shutting that down". When an instructor feels that taking control of their classroom is difficult, it is crucial to understand why. Upon further questions, this instructor told me that she struggles with feeling that it's "[their] place" to call students out. She also went on to say that her "students didn't see [her] as a professor, [she] thinks it has to do with age and quite a bit with gender". Her perceived age impacts the way that students approach her and communicate with her. The instructor noted that when instructors are perceived as being young, students have a hard time differentiating between their instructors being peers or authority figures.

A first-year Graduate Teaching Assistant reportedly struggled with establishing authority with her students. She stated that, "they see me as a peer something, especially the male students". This instructor experienced an emailing incident when a male student was caught cheating. "He said he turned in work that he had already turned in for a different class...should not be considered plagiarism and he should be able to use it." He felt that he had the ability to tell this instructor what should be considered acceptable work to submit, which may have also been related to her perceived age.

Unfortunately, this kind of challenging has also happened to more seasoned women instructors. For example, one older faculty member reported experiencing a private challenge with a non-traditional student who was enrolled in one of her online courses over the summer. This student "sent [her] an email that said, 'well you probably didn't know this, how to open your class up', and you know, he screenshotted me the D2L directions for how to open my class up". She was frustrated by this student's disregard for her knowledge as an instructor who had

been operating the online course for the past eight weeks. It was evident that she knew how to maneuver through the D2L browser, but this student felt the need to demean her via email and question her intelligence and capability.

From the data collected, it is evident that students challenge women instructors in many ways. Some of these challenges are more outright and aggressive than others; however, it is important to note that all of these challenges are challenges, nonetheless. Equally important is that all of the women interviewed for this study noted that they did not believe they would have experienced these public or private challenges if they had been a man.

Justifications for Student Behavior

The second theme that emerged from this data was that many of the women instructors justified their students' behaviors. That is, most of the women faculty tried to make sense of the public and private challenges from students by offering "reasons" for why students might do such a thing. These justifications took many forms to include both internal justifications (i.e., instructors blamed themselves for why students might misbehave), and external justifications (i.e., something outside of the student made them misbehave). Interestingly, many of those who offered justifications were younger instructors. The intersectionality of age and gender is seen once again throughout this theme. Internal justification was observed during the moments where women were making it seem like their students' behavior was a result of something they, as the instructor, had done. External attributes were given to students as a justification for their behavior. This was illustrated when instructors would make it seem as though someone or something had distracted that student. Another form of justification that was given by almost every interviewee was the belief that if they were a man, they would have been taken seriously, and the bad behavior would not have happened in the first place. All of the justifications made

serve as a way to minimize the behavior made by the student against the instructor, as well as to minimize the role of the instructor.

Internal Justification

Internal justification occurs when the instructor holds a lot of blame for why their students are misbehaving. They may feel that if they are not stereotypically feminine, nurturing, and overly-nice, that their students will challenge them, and because of the instructor's "shortcomings", the bad behavior is justified. Internal justification places the blame on the instructor and takes the blame away from the student, even though the student is the one who made the decision to act in whichever manner resulted in a challenge.

A young instructor in her first year as a Graduate Teaching Assistant explained to me that her students "say thank you when [she] take[s] the extra time to explain something to them". She went on to explain that her students are nice and respectful towards her after she takes extra time out of the class schedule to explain concepts to them. This is not necessarily bad. Taking extra time for your students is important, and almost every instructor does it because they care and want their students to learn the material and be able to apply it on their own. However, it becomes problematic when students are only respectful and pleasant if you take extra time out of your schedule for them. This seemed to be the case that was illustrated from the experience of this Graduate Teaching Assistant, which shed light onto an issue of women having to be "extra" nice and taking extra time for their students to be respectful.

In another interview, an instructor mentioned that her age influenced the respect she was given many times, as well as her race. Since she was not from America, she felt that her students picked up on that and treated her differently because of it. She mentioned that "[she] think[s] it's

hard for them to take [her] seriously, [she] think[s] that if [she] was a white man in the classroom they would take [her] seriously”. She noted many times that her race (i.e., the fact that she isn’t American) can be hard on the students and may cause them to act out. This young instructor essentially is taking the blame for her students lack of respect because she is not a white man. She also notes that she needs to work extra hard to help them understand her. She explained that “they see [she] is not white, [she] is not even American. [She has] a different accent. It gives them a vibe that this person is not from here. They may not have that trust. [She has] to do extra effort to get that trust”. This instructor was struggling greatly with her students in the classroom and rather than holding her students accountable for their poor behavior, she took a lot of that blame for herself. She felt that because she was different, it was somehow her fault that her students were not behaving in a way that coincided with proper classroom decorum.

A first-year Graduate Teaching Assistant mentioned that when her students are challenging her, it can be difficult to handle the situation. She stated that, “what is particularly difficult is when I can tell a student is lying to me, but I don’t feel like it’s my place to call them out on the lie”. This instructor had mentioned her age multiple times during the interview process as well as how she preferred to be transparent with her students about her role and the fact that she had told her students that “[she’s] just a grad student” and “[has] a supervisor”. These examples highlight the way that the instructor struggles with holding her students accountable in the way that makes them take responsibility for their actions. She feels that she is not able to ask them to provide further proof for something when she feels that her students are lying, and this stems from a lack of perceived authority. Due to her young age and her gender, she tried to minimize the student’s responsibility for behaving appropriately in the classroom, and instead, took on that responsibility by carrying some of the blame for her students’ behavior.

A seasoned instructor, who has been teaching for a longer period of time than some of the younger instructors but is still oftentimes perceived as being quite young has struggled with internal justification. She has held a lot of the blame for her students challenging her, and even their success in her class. She stated that, “[she is] conditioned to believe that when a student does poorly, it is my fault”. She said that she cares greatly about her students, but it has gotten to the point where she is taking the blame for their lack of trying, disrespect, or other challenges that they initiate with her as the instructor. The pressure to take responsibility for students is present for many instructors, but this has been an obvious theme found with women, especially young women and women of color, in academia.

A professor who is also perceived as being younger than she is mentioned some of her struggles and the justifications that have come with them. She mentioned that she has two different teaching versions of herself that she constantly battles. She has one version that wants to be strict and tough with the students, especially those who challenge her. The other version of her is much nicer, nurturing, and understanding. This constant battle ensues whenever there is a student that challenges her and she has to decide how to react. The latter version of herself is the one that she usually chooses to utilize because that version is much more kind and understanding. This form of justification was internalized because she felt that she had to change her initial response in order for her students to cooperate with her. If she were to be strict or tough on her students, they would not respond well to that, or it would be too harsh.

Overall, of the women instructors in this study worked hard to find reasons why students misbehaved in and outside the classroom. These justifications seem to shift the blame from students to the instructors. In most cases, younger instructors faced the feelings of self-blame; if only they were older, more experienced, or less “caring,” then students would behave better.

However, even some of the more experienced instructors struggled with appropriately placing responsibility onto the student for their actions. Many seasoned instructors noted that students were immature and trying to learn their place in college, or that some external factor prevented students from behaving better (e.g., he's busy with sports and has a lot going on in his life). It appears that there is a societal pressure to be kind and understanding towards students, especially as women instructors who are also expected to be nurturing. This pressure leads to justifications where women instructors hold some, if not all of the blame, for poor student behavior. These justifications alarmingly indicate that these instructors believe that, if only they (women instructors) were more like men, less young and inexperienced, or even more American, then students surely wouldn't behave as poorly as they do in and outside the classroom.

External Attributes

Women faculty also used external attributes, as mentioned briefly above, to make sense of poor student behaviors both in- and outside of the classroom. These external attributes can be found in explanations such as a student being distracted by another student, a student being embarrassed and not knowing what to say or how to handle a situation after it had occurred, or the student not being mature enough yet because they are still adjusting to college. All of these types of reasoning allow for responsibility to be deflected off of the student and placed on to some external factor that the student simply cannot control.

One instructor mentioned that she had a student who was challenging her within the classroom for two days in a row, and when she confronted him and asked him what he was upset about that was impacting his performance in class, he listed a multitude of things that were going wrong in his life. "Basically, he was an athlete on the verge of being kicked off the team, he was not doing well in any of his classes and he just kind of felt everything caving in on him". The

instructor noted that he was acting inappropriately in class because of the other things that were occurring in his life. Rather than calling the student out for bad behavior, this instructor justified the student's actions. She worked very hard to provide external reasons as to why this student might be acting disrespectfully in the classroom. This justification of his (the student's) behavior, sadly enough, allowed him to keep acting poorly. This same instructor noted several other examples of poor student behavior but seemed to justify each of these incidents. This instructor stated that she became very irritated she is treated differently because of her gender. She added, "particularly when it's from another women. I could understand if a male student isn't at that point, you know, I don't like it, but it makes sense". The instructor essentially was saying that it is especially irritating if a woman student challenges her in the classroom, but if a man does it, she is not surprised and understands it because they are not "at that point". By allowing a student to fall back on their gender or maturity level as reasoning to misbehave and challenge an instructor in the classroom, it furthers the belief that students do not have to be held accountable for their actions.

During a separate interview, an instructor mentioned that she has a lot of students who know that she cares about them, their success, and wellbeing. Because of that, she faces a lot of students who challenge her and then expect that they can get away with things or that certain poor behaviors will be allowed because she (the instructor) cares for them. She mentioned that she knows that a lot of her students are busy, and she even went on to say that they don't "consciously" take advantage of her, but they may feel that, "[if they] have five assignments in five other classes, but [they] know that this person is maybe not going to be as angry if [they] are late, [they] won't try as hard or do as much". Because her students are busy, she attributes their

busy schedules to the reasons for why they are not taking the time to properly complete or even attempt to do their work in her class.

I noticed that a first-year Graduate Teaching Assistant used external attributes frequently when talking about her students' negative and challenging behavior. After asking her about the ways that she has experienced respect or disrespect in the classroom, she said, "I haven't had too many issues with direct disrespect, nothing outright. Just students trying to be sneaky. I have been blessed in that sense". She was reducing their challenging behavior in class to just being sneaky, as if that was something to be grateful for. This justification was disappointing, but a true reality for many women instructors.

She also mentioned that her students "seem to understand the college setting a little bit more and they expect me to understand as well. [She] think[s] that they also seek out a sense of camaraderie because [they] are kind of the same age. Can [they] get away with this?" Because of her age, she felt that her students would feel that they would have an easier time getting away with bad behavior. She identified that they want to have a sense of camaraderie with her, which is the cause for their sometimes-sneaky behavior. She gives them these external attributes in order to avoid placing the blame entirely on the student for their behavior, which has become a harsh reality for many instructors that I interviewed.

Even outright sexist comments were explained away as something a student couldn't help or was embarrassed about. One young instructor told the story of a young male student making an inappropriate comment to her. She noted, "He made a very inappropriate sexual comment that came out of his mouth in class. He was obviously embarrassed and didn't even know what to say". This instructor went on to rationalize why he was being sexist while explaining the scenario to me. By saying that he was embarrassed and did not know what to say after the fact,

she was downplaying the severity of the sexual remarks and chalking this student's behavior up to him being a young, immature (and embarrassed) boy. It appeared that the participant was also working very hard to assign external attributes to this student in order to minimize his offensive behavior in class.

Another instructor noted that "if one person is on the phone, the person beside them can see and that distracts them". She wasn't upset with the distracted or disruptive student, but merely offering a rationale for why some students might not behave the best in the classroom. She went on to say that, "they are still learning. They are in the learning phase. They are adults, but they are still kids. They are trying to know how to behave and work in this environment". She also mentioned that many students are experiencing a transition which she deemed as a possible cause for their negative behavior.

Role Model & Role of the Nurturer

The third prominent theme from the data suggests that women instructors feel pressure to be positive role models for their students, and when they are old enough, to take on the role of a nurturer (e.g., a mother figure). The need to be a role model connects to the way that instructors want to be seen as good teachers. The women in the study noted that they strive to be likeable while also trying to not be seen as too hard or too strict. These instructors mentioned that they monitor their behavior to make sure that they are setting a good example for their students, which then should encourage their students to act appropriately.

Many of the instructors noted that they are more likely to be open with students to show that they care. They express concern and report that they are, at times, seen as counselors to their students when they, in fact, are not meant to take on that role. Most faculty in this study reported

that they want to connect to their students which makes them feel that they have to take on the role of the nurturer. Some instructors even shared that they have felt bad at times because their race and age may prevent them from being nurturing or role models for students. They noted that their age and race makes some students uncomfortable or unwilling to open up to the instructor; which in turn, of course, makes the instructor feel bad. Role modeling is not something that is inherently bad, in fact, in most cases being a role model is a desirable trait. However, women who feel that they have to behave and act as perfect human beings all of the time are at risk for experiencing burnout and becoming frustrated within academia. As noted, there were many moments in this study that women felt that they had to work twice as hard to be considered half as good as their men colleagues, in which constant role modeling is another example of being held to a higher standard.

Role Modeling

Role modeling seemed to be a big concern for younger women instructors. A first-year Graduate Teaching Assistant shared a story about a time when a student was mistreating her in the classroom. During her interview she noted, “I don’t want other students to see that and think that’s how other female teachers are allowed to be treated”. This statement was made about issues of challenging in the classroom and being disrespected. The pressure to act appropriately in the classroom and set a good example for how women should be treated by their students is a common theme that was found in almost every interview during this study.

A seasoned instructor explained that her student evaluations have, at times, shown commonalities. These comments that are left by students saying things like, “[She’s] too tough or hard. That’s a comment that [she doesn’t] think, men instructors get. [She’s] expected to be nicer than [men]”. This instructor expressed frustration that women instructors are oftentimes held to

different standards. She is considered to be too tough, but when male instructors have the same standards, they are not considered to be too tough, they are seen as just doing their job as an educator. She also mentioned that she feels that “[she has] to show that [she] respect[s] them and their position...mutual respect is essential to an environment where people can learn and feel comfortable sharing”. This instructor feels that in order to have her students respect her, she must respect them. Mutual respect is important and should be encouraged in every classroom. However, when it turns into a cycle where the instructor must first respect the students in order to have respect from them, it becomes a problem and falls into the pressure to be a role model.

When talking to a young GTA, she recalled that she has found herself role modeling for her students on many different occasions. When asked about respect in the college classroom and the role that it plays, she said, “respect is incredibly important. It is about treating each other as decent human beings. A two-way street for professors and students”. By respecting her students, she creates an environment where respect can be reciprocated. She also explained in her interview that “[she] has encountered students who are genuinely great students, great to know, and [she] would love to establish a friendship with them. But [she] knows that [she] cannot due to [her] professional obligation”. She is illustrating multiple points with this statement. There seems to be the underlying implication that women cannot be friends with their students, because they have to uphold professional obligations. She is also framing her role as a role model to her students, who takes her job seriously and wants to give them a full and educational experience with no question as to what her role is.

Another instructor shared her feelings of how important respect is in the classroom. She stated, “I have always believed that respect is a two-way street...I have an obligation to treat my students with respect with the expectation that they will do the same”. By saying that she has an

obligation, there is the implied presence that she is a role model to her students, and by giving them respect, they will also extend that same respect to her as the instructor.

In another interview, it was explained by an instructor as to how important respect is and what role it plays in the classroom. Her response was complex and evoked a lot of reflection from myself as I was analyzing data. She stated that, “I think it really impacts how you are perceived by students and whether or not they’re going to hold you accountable for when they do poorly or well vs. whether they will take responsibility for those instances. I feel like I try to walk the line between being approachable so that students feel comfortable coming to me with things and trying to have some sort of authority so that they do respect that there is a back and forth here but ultimately I am in this role”.

This instructor explained how she was feeling the pressure to be a good role model and exemplify her authority while also being approachable for her students. She felt that she was in a constant struggle to figure out what would be the best way to maneuver her classroom.

She also went on to explain that she has experienced working with some women who “have very hard expectations of students and they get a lot of pushback and get called a lot of names behind their backs”. When women instructors have expectations for their students that are considered too hard and strict, they do face a lot of resistance. When other instructors see the resistance that their co-workers are facing, they have to decide what risks they want to take within their classroom to become the role model that they want to portray.

Another seasoned instructor examined the way that respect plays a role in her classroom as well as the pressure to be a role model for students. She stated that, “A strong woman is a bitch automatically. So, if you were to walk into your classroom and have these very rigid rules

like my male colleagues do, like ‘no, I’m not negotiating extra credit, a new due date, a change in grade. Be happy with what you got.’ My male colleagues can do that, and they are seen as stern professors. If I were to do that and not at least entertain their conversations and pretend that I am considering it, then I am a bitch.”

When examining the pressure to be a good role model in the classroom as an instructor, it is important to look at the ways that women are criticized by their students if they do not perform exactly how they “should” act. Most of the women faculty in this study expressed frustrations over what they felt were expectations of them because of their gender. Overall, the instructors feel the unanimous pressure to be a good role model for their students in order to conduct a positive learning environment and to be seen as a good teacher. Some of these instructors monitor their behavior in order to uphold the standard of being a good role model through being “likeable”, monitoring their behavior, and trying not to be too tough or too hard.

The Role of the Nurturer

Being a nurturer is a societal pressure that has been placed on women for decades. Being a nurturer is an expectation, and when women do not act in a way that would label them as being nurturers, they face resistance and backlash for it. Women in academia are just as susceptible to being pressured into acting as the nurturer. They may feel that they have to be open with students, express concern, recognize that all of their students are not “bad”, as well as want to connect with their students. Many times, women find themselves acting as a counselor to their student. This can become exhausting for instructors as well as unsafe for students who need to seek professional help at a counseling center.

A first-year Graduate Teaching Assistant explained that it is important for students to “kn[ow] she cares and is there for them”. She wants her students to know that she is there for them and supports them, which embodies the societal pressure to be nurturers in whatever job women decide to take on. She felt that she had to tell me that she cared for her students, otherwise she would be seen as a bad instructor.

Another instructor, who has struggled with the pressure to be nurturing, noted that she has to address that all of her students are not bad. When asked about respect in the college classroom, she explicitly stated, “everyone is not a bad student or disrespectful...you have to be respectful”.

During another interview, an instructor spoke with me about her perceived role in the classroom as an instructor. She said that, “students tend to think of me as a mom. So, they want me to give them a pass or a break or they share a lot of their personal stories and feelings like they want me to be that comfort for them”. She also was sure to explain that the expectation of being a mom for her students is something that has happened as she has gotten older. By having her students share personal stories with her and ask for special favors, there is an expectation that she will be more nurturing because of her gender and perceived age.

In an enlightening interview with an instructor who claims to not be extremely maternal, she spoke about the ways that she is expected to act as an instructor. She stated that, “there is an expectation that [she] will be more emotionally available for students. That [she] will be the loving, huggy, professor and [she] is not that person. [She] doesn’t know many male professors that are like that”. She has been able to actively identify the ways that she is expected to act, and she is not someone who acts in those ways, so there are times where she has faced resistance from students.

She also went on to say that, “students think I should be like their mother. When I first started teaching, as a graduate student, I was in my thirties. I remember having students that would use my office hours to unload about their personal lives. I got to the point where I realized that this was happening so much and I would stop students and tell them to talk to someone in the counseling center. I have had students come out to me, and I appreciate that because it’s a safe space and that’s good but the students that want to talk to me about their break up’s and use this to talk about their personal lives. If I was a man, I believe I wouldn’t get that at all.”

When students were utilizing her office hours as a form of counseling, she was able to identify that her role was being confused by her students and that boundaries needed to be set. Many women who were interviewed speak about being treated as if they are their students’ counselors, when in reality, they are not meant to serve that purpose.

Another instructor mentioned a similar theme in her interview. She was speaking on the ways she has experienced pressures from her students to act as a nurturer when she mentioned that, “[she] was showing symptoms of caretaker fatigue...[she] love[s] caring about [her] students, that’s what keeps [her] going, but at the same time [she] can’t care so much that [she’s] extending all of [her] emotional energy on one student. There is an expectation that you are more willing or able to do that than your male colleagues”. Women are expected to act in this way and take time to be a counselor to their students. This is exhausting for many people, as well as an unfair expectation. The pressure to perform as a talented instructor is high enough without also having to take on the role of a counselor (or mother) as well.

Similar perceptions were also shared by another seasoned instructor when discussing the student encounters that she has had in the classroom. She mentioned that, “I have had a lot of students...cry who were expecting me to nurture them and play mom. Some who want advice as

to should they break up with boyfriend/girlfriend, should they move in with boyfriend/girlfriend...”. It is evident that there is a common theme of women feeling that they have to act as nurturers, or “mom” to their students. This is a concept that was found within the data with women who are perceived as being older.

Taking on the role of a nurturer can be found in many different forms. Women who feel that they have to prove that they care about their students, that they are concerned for their wellbeing and success in class, as well as wanting to connect with them, are fueled by a societal pressure.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The study wouldn’t be complete if we didn’t ask the “now what” question. One final question I asked the interviewees was to talk about how they handle all of these experiences with student behaviors in- and outside the classroom. I wanted to know what women have done or can do to effectively handle differential treatment in the classroom. The participants noted four prominent ways that they have handled these behaviors and/or wished were available to deal with student challenging. These include: (1) ignoring it, (2) direct confrontation, (3) over-compensation, and (4) relying on colleagues.

Ignoring It

While it may not seem like the most practical way of handling challenging students, it was mentioned by multiple instructors that at times, the most effective way of dealing with a challenging student is to ignore them. The reasoning for ignoring the challenging behavior varies from instructor to instructor, however, their reasoning provides interesting insight that may be further implemented in the future by other instructors.

An instructor mentioned that they will “ignore, or if it is too much, I will tell them”. There seems to be an invisible line to where mistreatment becomes too much, and in this case, until it becomes too much, it will be ignored. Another instructor mentioned that she too, will “call them out in class if [she] is frustrated enough”. As mentioned earlier, it will be ignored until it becomes too much, and then at that point it will be addressed. Sometimes, she will choose to “call them out on it” or “send an email like ‘just checking on you – things didn’t seem right’”.

Even seasoned instructors mentioned that they have used silenced as a way to ignore times when they face challenging students. One instructor said that she mostly chooses to “vent in [her] office”. She chooses not to speak out in many cases because she does not want to “seem like [she] is whining or being perceived as weak, like [she] can’t handle [her] students in the classroom”. Many of the women in this study noted concern with administration as a large reason why they do not speak up when they have faced challenging students in their classroom. There seems to be perceived pressure to handle things on their own. Most women in the study felt that if an instructor voices her struggles with students, she may be perceived as incompetent.

Another instructor noted that she will “excuse it and ignore it” because she does not want to disrupt the classroom by calling a student out. She went on to say that she would rather just “deal with it emotionally later on my own.” For those instructors who avoided challenging students, they expressed concerns when they choose to ignore it, thus silencing their experience. For this reason, some instructors explored other ways of dealing with disruptive and challenging behavior.

Direct Confrontation

Direct confrontation of students is another theme that emerged from the data. Several instructors noted that by directly speaking to a challenging student, issues can be resolved in a quick manner; and it allows for students to assess their role within the classroom. Some instructors felt most comfortable addressing a student within the classroom, while others waited to speak with a student after class and even via email.

One instructor said that she will choose to call challenging students out in class most times, but may wait and email them, depending on the size of the class, as this played an important role in determining which choice she felt was most appropriate. At one point this instructor noted that she had three problem students at one time. She decided to “call them out by name and tell them to come see me after class”. When this happened, the students apologized for being disruptive, but their “behavior never changed”.

Another instructor said that she typically talks to a student privately if there is an issue within the classroom. “Most of the time it is through email”. She feels that this allows her to maintain the learning environment and also address the issue at hand. When she is able to effectively communicate with the student, she noted that there are rarely times when the situation escalates further, and she hasn’t felt the need to contact Student Standards or any other higher branch of discipline.

Another seasoned instructor mentioned that she is not afraid to bring things out into the open. She went on to say that “[she] tries not to do this in harsh ways but [she has] had students who have responded in really strange ways so [she tries] to do it as privately as possible. If the challenging act is especially egregious, she will call it out in class and address it without hesitation. However, when appropriate, she feels that an email can be just as effective towards correcting student challenging and misbehavior. Most important to note about direct

confrontation is that this only occurred predominately with older, more seasoned women faculty members. Most younger women faculty and faculty of color expressed deep concerns and reluctance to directly address bad student behavior in- and outside the classroom. When these faculty did confront a student, they typically did so through less public means such as through emails.

Over-Compensation

The notion of over-compensating for challenging students also emerged as another strong theme from the data. Over-compensation can be found in different ways, such as some instructors over-compensating their level of confidence, while others note they have to work even harder as women faculty than male faculty. Other women faculty expressed the need to be a perfect role model at all times in hopes of getting respect back from students.

One instructor mentioned that “confidence is important, you have to have confidence. If you don’t have it everyone will try to not pay attention to you”. She went on to talk about how having confidence helps you feel better as an instructor, which impacts performance in the classroom. Another instructor noted that throughout her experience it has been increasingly and alarmingly obvious that “women have to work twice as hard to be seen as half as good”. This is troubling not only for women who are trying to start their careers, but also for women who have spent their lives trying to prove that they are good enough to have all of the credit they deserve, not just half.

A first-year Graduate Teaching Assistant even mentioned that she feels a lot of pressure to be a positive role model for her students; she noted that she needed to set an example for her student to have an effective and smooth-running classroom environment. She said that, “you

need to always be respectful because they are still learning how to interact within the college setting. If you are giving them the example of yelling or being constantly disrespectful to them, that can carry throughout their college experience.” This belief that women faculty first need to set a good example for students before getting good behavior in return was prominent across many younger women faculty and faculty of colors’ narratives. This seems to suggest that there may be even more pressure for these faculty to perform harder and use more over-compensation to get good student behavior beyond what is already granted to older women faculty and male faculty.

It’s important to note that over-compensation can be an effective way for some instructors to handle students who are challenging and disrespectful in the classroom. However, many women faculty noted that it can also be an exhaustive practice that can lead to insecurity and a false sense of confidence.

Relying on Colleagues

Relying on colleagues emerged as the strongest and most productive theme for coping with and processing the daily occurrences of challenging students within the college classroom. All women faculty in this study noted that they have leaned on other women colleagues at their institution. They note that having a group of individuals who they can rely on and ask for help and advice from, has given them the chance to decompress from and make sense of challenging student behaviors.

One instructor mentioned that peer support is the “best resource” that they found. She noted that it is important to talk about things and what others would have done in those situations while feeling “supported by that”. Another instructor felt that support from administrator was not

available. She mentioned that in her experience administrative support is not “readily available” and that “there [is] nothing in place to protect women faculty”. This lack of support leads to individuals feeling that their voice does not matter, and they are not an essential part of faculty.

During the interview process, one instructor mentioned that “this is all about a business and butts in seats are much more important than quality of education and quality relationships and so [she] feels like the administration is all about protecting student dollars...than they are faculty treatment and mistreatment”. When administration is more concerned with student enrollment and not taking into consideration their faculty members and how they are being treated, that can lead to feeling invalidated. This same instructor also mentioned that many times, “we lean on each other as women to get advice”. The women faculty in this study felt they were most supported when they could ask other women to listen to and share their experiences with challenging students. These faculty also noted that peer support was most helpful when deciding what to do with a student or how to approach Student Standards and even Administrative Officials.

Even relatively new women faculty understood and expressed the value of peer support when facing challenging situations. One first-year Graduate Teaching Assistant shared that she feels without supervisor help she would be “lost”. She went on to say, “I can text all of the other GTA’s and ask them for advice...I rely on their judgement so I’m not the only one making the call”. This instructor also highlighted the importance of having a supportive group of individuals who can identify what you are going through and how they handled that same or similar situation.

Based on the findings from this study, relying on women colleagues seems to be the way most women instructors feel less alone, and get affirmation and validation for their decisions

when talking about how they planned to handle a situation with their students. This was true for all levels of women faculty, from the very youngest to the most seasoned faculty members. It seems that having a support system is important, no matter what the job title is.

When looking at all four themes or ways to handle challenging students, it is important to recognize that there is no one correct way to do it, and many instructors have differing opinions and tactics for approaching challenging situations and students. What is evident from all of the interview data is that no formal methods or mechanisms are in place for handling challenging students for women faculty and faculty of color. All of the participants, however, noted the need for formal and informal mentorship programs, suggesting that it would be beneficial to not only incoming faculty members, but to everyone who teaches in the classroom to have a mentor who could help when challenging situations arise.

Chapter 4: Discussion

The purpose of my study was to examine gendered practices and experiences in academia among women instructors and students. I explored student-instructor interactions within and outside the classroom in order to examine the ways in which women instructors may perceive or encounter differential treatment from men and women students. I was also interested in exploring the ways in which age intersects with gender of an instructor and how this shapes student-instructor interactions. Finally, as research has demonstrated, faculty of color report differential treatment in the classroom, and thus, I also explored the ways in which the intersection of gender and race shape student-instructor interactions. A secondary goal of this study was to examine the ways in which women faculty cope with and handle differential treatment inside and outside of their classrooms.

I interviewed women instructors that ranged from tenured faculty members all the way to first-year Graduate Teaching Assistants. I wanted to ensure that my interviewees came from a wide range of perspectives within academia so it would be evident if the pattern of disrespect and challenging was prevalent among all women. Having a larger pool of women to interview better enabled me to illustrate their experiences as individuals while also showing readers that this is a legitimate issue in academia. My study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are women's experiences with mistreatment and gendered behaviors in the classroom, and how does that make possible a climate of disrespect?

RQ2: How might age and race of a woman instructor shape student-instructor interactions?

RQ3: How do women faculty cope with the issues of differential treatment in the classroom?

The research questions were created to focus on multiple aspects of the experience that women have within and outside of their classrooms. It was important to me to focus on not only their experience as a woman, but how their age and race plays a role in their perception of how they are treated. My last research question was posed to women instructors in order to understand and hear about the ways that they dealt with the challenges from their students. Understanding the different ways that instructors cope with differential treatment that they go through inside of the classroom also highlights the importance of having an open dialogue about this topic.

As a framework for understanding gendered interactions in the classroom I referenced Standpoint Theory. Standpoint Theory is a feminist theoretical perspective that states that knowledge comes from the social position of an individual. Sandra Harding initially used the term standpoint theory because she felt that it was important to emphasize women's knowledge. It is important to note that this theory is especially useful to those who are at lower tiers within the social hierarchy because they have interesting perspectives that allow for important research questions to be made and to have a better understanding of social problems (Harding, 2004). By utilizing Standpoint Theory, I was able to validate the experiences of those who were interviewed and understand that their knowledge stems from their position within society. Therefore, the women who were interviewed oftentimes said that they felt that they could not speak up, that they were being challenged by their students, and that they had limited resources to aid them in finding a solution. As noted before, having an understanding of people's lived experiences allowed me to "identify the role that their social ground has had on them" (Hartsock, 2007, p. 499). Research questions one and two were fueled by Standpoint Theory, and from

analyzing the interview data, it is evident that the women interviewed definitely have a social position within academia that is lower than the men that they work alongside.

Summary of Findings:

From RQ1 data showed that women struggle with two main challenge types: public and private. These challenge types take many different forms, and they are utilized within and outside of the classroom by men and women. Public challenging was analyzed as something that occurs in moments where students engage in verbal arguing or noticeable nonverbal dissatisfaction with an instructor during class and in front of others (mostly other students). It was evident that this was something worth noting during thematic analysis and the coding process because all of the women in this study reported times where they were publicly challenged, whether it was recent or early on in their career. As noted, whether the offense happened recently or was something that occurred early on in their career, every instructor encountered public challenging from their students, which shed light on the commonality of being challenged by students. After analyzing the data from the interview process, it was evident that men challenged instructors in a much more public sense than the women in the classroom.

There were an equally alarming number of private challenges from students that were mentioned by women instructors during this study. The best way to understand private challenges is that they occur in private spaces. These often occurred via email, after class, or during a faculty member's office hours. A second way of privately challenging women faculty was through nonverbal cues in and outside the class in direct response to the instructor in some way. These forms of challenges were typically categorized as being passive aggressive. Examples of passive aggressive challenging emerged as sexual flirting, eye rolling, refusal to go to office hours, refusal to acknowledge proper address terms, and coming in late to class.

By having public and private challenges present within the classroom environment, it facilitates an environment of disrespect. Many instructors talked about how they felt that they would not have been challenged in such a way by their students if they were a man. The challenges from students took away from class time, diminished the classroom environment, and damaged the self-worth and perception of safety for multiple instructors. In other words, women must “play by the rules” and put their own values and beliefs aside. Unfortunately, this mindset extends beyond student thinking in some realms of academia. For instance, in an interview with a male academic, Søndergaard (2001) noted that a male professor “advises and stresses that women should grasp the opportunity to use ‘their femininity’ as a way of ensuring their visibility and positive recognition in the eyes of their male colleagues and leaders” (p. 143). This is another form of women being subjected to sexist, gendered, and challenging behaviors within academia that has limited their ability to perform at their highest level.

Age and race of women instructors certainly impacted student-instructor interactions. The intersectionality of these components played interesting and unique roles in the way that women were treated by their students, especially for those women faculty who were younger and of color. When examining Patricia Hill-Collins’s work on intersectionality, Jingzhou (2017) states, “Collins and Bilge are able to differentiate between critical inquiry and praxis. Furthermore, they expound on the critical articulations of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, demonstrating the complexity in how an individual politic of identities emerges within various compositions of interlocking systems of oppression” (Jingzhou, 2017, p. 125). Being perceived as a younger instructor seemed to be the green-light for students to question the authority of the instructor as well as her credentials. Many times, students would ask what type of degree the instructor had, as well as why they (a young, woman instructor) were allowed to teach the class.

As mentioned in the introduction of this study, Tindall (2009) states, “female faculty members of color find themselves outside of the mainstream of academic life and culture. These professors are ‘marginalized and excluded from meaningful participation in their academic departments’ (Woods, 2001, p. 196) (p.2)”. My findings that emerged from the data share many similarities to Tindall’s (2009) study, with the exception that it appears women faculty of color are excluded from meaningful student interactions rather than excluded from departmental life. Young women faculty of color in my study reported that they felt bad because they weren’t “American enough” and spent lots of time justifying their students’ behavior. One instructor particularly felt bad about the color of her skin because she felt that it was a barrier between her and her students when making an attempt to connect with them, which she felt would then, in turn, improve the classroom environment and behavior of her students.

Additionally, instructors who were perceived as being older by their students were treated much differently than women who were perceived as being young and inexperienced. Women who were perceived as being older, were labeled as being a mother figure to students. There was an added expectation that women who were perceived as being older would be more lenient, nurturing, and kind to students. This expectation led to women feeling as though they had another added pressure within the classroom, and when they did not act in accordance with the role that their students had prescribed to them, they were often met with challenges, disrespect, and dissatisfaction from their students.

For my final research question, I wanted to know how women faculty handled differential treatment from students. My findings suggest that women faculty members cope with the issues of differential treatment in many different ways. As noted in the findings chapter of my thesis, there were four main ways women cope with such treatment: ignore it, confront it directly,

justify it, and seek peer support. Peer support seemed to be the most important and effective way for women faculty to cope with differential treatment in- and outside the classroom. Each faculty I interviewed mentioned the tremendous importance of having other women and colleagues that they could talk to, get advice from, and decompress with. Feeling that they had others to speak to that could relate to their experience and share advice with made their experiences within the classroom easier to handle and move forward from.

With this being said, there was a large push from the interviewees that mentioned how beneficial it would be to focus on professional and formal mentorship and peer support. Women who did not feel that they had the best peer support during the early years of their careers strongly supported the idea of formal mentorship. Not only would this guarantee that women would have someone to speak with when they were struggling with their students, but it would also create a sense of comradery. Considering that academia is still rooted in very patriarchal practices, it is understood that women's experiences as instructors are oftentimes reduced to being part of an overly-emotional response, or not being discussed at all. Meyers (2014) states that, "those who have not experienced or witnessed gender discrimination and other acts of sexism that are, in fact, commonplace within higher education generally believe that accusations of unfair and inequitable treatment of women in academe is hyperbolic, overstated, unjust, and unwarranted" (p. 274). Mentorship would help to establish a network of women who feel that they can safely share their experiences without feeling that they are being categorized as weak or incompetent instructors.

After doing this research, it shows that women instructors face many of the same struggles inside and outside of the classroom, however, many women are hesitant to speak about their experiences. Over and over again during the interview process I heard women talking about

how they have had to work twice as hard, just to be seen as half as good as their male colleagues. The pressure to prove your worth is at an all-time high in academia, and it seems that many women are afraid that they will not be seen as competent if they share their experiences that they have had with their students. This study gave a voice to women, because the focus of the study was to better understand how women are challenged by their students, what factors play a determining factor in the received treatment, and how they cope with the treatment. In doing this study, I wanted women to feel that they had been heard, and that their narrative would not just stop with me but be projected into this study to show that we are not alone as instructors. Many of the instructors told stories that had shocking similarities, and if that can allow other women instructors to feel that they are not alone, it may kickstart a long-needed discussion.

One theoretical implication that can be identified from this study is that women were given a chance to a voice their experiences, even for some women who did not feel that they could speak up before. Many women mentioned during their interviews that they felt better just by talking about the challenges that they have faced in- and outside of the classroom. By giving women in academia, or any workplace environment, a chance to stand up and speak their truth, it can allow for validation and closure. In addition, giving women the opportunity to share their stories and their methods of coping with the challenges they have faced with their students is an important first step in creating change in academia, and it can be used as a tool for validating their stories, as well as the stories of others. My hope is that others will feel empowered by this study and begin opening up about their experiences as well. If anything, I hope this study becomes a conversation starter for much needed dialogue about differential treatment in the classroom for women faculty, especially for younger women faculty and women faculty of color. However, I do want to emphasize that women in academia do not all have the same experience.

Standpoint theory can be critiqued due to the assumption that women and other minority groups have the same experience and story to tell. The purpose of this study was to value and understand each woman instructor and find overarching themes within their narratives. As the data demonstrates, all women faculty have had experiences with students challenging them both in- and outside the classroom, yet each faculty member's experience with these challenges is unique and is influenced both the layers of identity each brings to the classroom experience.

Perhaps this study can negate the reported "silencing effect" women in this study reported because they did not want to be perceived as weak or whiny by their colleagues. A way to eradicate that sense of shame for telling their story is to encourage women to share their experiences. By creating a safe and welcoming environment for women to share their experiences, there is also room for mentorship and connections to grow between instructors.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this study was the small sample size of participants. I interviewed eight women faculty members from one mid-Western university. The pool of individuals that I had the pleasure of interviewing was not large, which may have led to less inclusive results. Having a larger pool of interviewees, across more diverse university settings, could have generated more narratives, which could have led to the reporting of more diverse narrative experiences related to gendered practices in the classroom.

Another limitation was that there were few faculty members of color who were included in this study. Only two women faculty members interviewed for this study self-identified as being women of color. Having more faculty members of color for this study could help provide more inclusive findings to answer my second research question.

Future studies would benefit from having a larger sample size of women faculty ranging in age and employment status (e.g., graduate assistants, adjuncts, non-tenured, tenured), as well as ensuring larger, more diverse sampling of faculty of color from more diverse university settings. A second issue that emerged that could shed light on women's abilities to cope with differential treatment in the classroom, would be to examine university administrator's roles. Studies should examine administration rules and policies and the way that they influence and control how women instructors are treated, protected, and valued. A number of women mentioned in their interview that they feel administration could do more. Whether this be providing resources to women when they are struggling with a student, protecting faculty members to the same degree that students are protected, or even being willing to sit down and speak with instructors who are being challenged by their students. Most of the women faculty in this study noted that they felt administration was more invested in protecting the students than they were women faculty. All of the participants then noted that administration is in need of some adjustments.

One final recommendation for future studies would be to also interview men faculty members. It may be interesting and worthwhile to have the contrasting experience of men colleagues. This can help us see how men and women faculty member's experiences are similar or different in the classroom. Most women faculty in this study noted that they didn't believe they would have been treated so poorly by students if they were men. A study comparing women and men faculty's experiences could shed more light on these perceptions and demonstrate whether or not these perceptions are accurate. Finally, including men's experiences can further our efforts to open up safe spaces for all faculty members to engage in dialogue about difficult student behavior both in- and outside the classroom.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

RQ1: In what ways does an instructor's gender influence student-instructor interactions inside and outside of the classroom?

1. What is your current position here at the university?
2. Have you ever encountered a difficult interaction with a student in the classroom? If so, can you provide an example.
3. Have you had similar or other difficult student encounters outside the classroom? If so, can you give an example?
4. Do you believe that your gender plays a role in the way your students interact with you?
If so, can you share an experience with me that illustrates that?
5. What role do you believe that respect plays in the college classroom?
6. In what ways have you experienced “respect” or “disrespect” in the classroom?
7. Do you believe that your teaching style has changed because of differential treatment and/or gendered practices? Can you explain?

RQ2: How might age and race of a woman instructor shape student-instructor interactions?

1. Can you think of a time that your age played a role in the way your students interacted with you? What happened? How might this have been linked to your age?
2. Do you believe that your race plays a role in the way your students interact with you?
How so? Can you give an example?

RQ3: What mechanisms are in place to help women negotiate differential treatment in the classroom?

1. When you've encountered mistreatment from students (perceived or real), how have you handled it?
2. What resources (e.g., other faculty, administrative support) do you feel are available to women faculty members in terms of classroom misconduct or mistreatment from students?
3. What resources would you like to see available to women who have these experiences?
4. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experiences in the classroom or about students who may challenge your authority in the classroom?